

SPORTS **A**FIELD

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LOADED for BOAR

by Paul H. Howe

During the past eighty or so years, while the grizzly bear has been hunted to practical extinction and the mountain lion driven to inaccessible Sierran crags, there has evolved a new and lusty "varmint" to provide sport and thrills for western hunters.



The ancestor of the hog is the wild boar.

THE Hunting Winds were loose and the old spring-fret was strong in us that dark dawn in March when we put forth from Santa Barbara into the gusty stretch of water separating the channel islands from the California mainland. Captain Ira Eaton's fifty-foot power launch was taking a small party of quietly excited hunters, loaded for boar, toward the last stronghold of dangerous wild game in California.

Spanish rancheros of a century ago raised hogs on the island group of Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel, twenty miles off the Southern California coast. After the Americans took the country, these islands were used for sheep-grazing. The swine were abandoned and forgotten. Allowed to run wild, no animal reverts to its prototype more quickly than the domestic hog. A few decades produced a long-tusked species whose size and gameness soon attracted the attention of Pacific Coast sportsmen. And thereby hangs this tale.

Our crowded launch bucked its way across the choppy Santa Barbara Channel, carrying a dozen assorted Nimrods, tongues hanging out with the desire to come to grips with the wary tuskers of Santa Cruz. By the time we finished our rough crossing some of the tongues were hanging out for another reason.

Solid ground underfoot rallying everyone, we quickly cached our duffle, and set out with our red-haired shepherd guide, a remarkable lad whose hunting equipment consisted of a .32 automatic and a juicy quid of tobacco of almost equal deadliness. He led us over steep grassy trails toward the plateau on the seaward side of the island. The exhilaration of a clear cool morning and anticipation of what lay ahead carried us easily over the rough going. Four miles of uphill tramping brought us to good boar country—shallow canyons separated by wide ridges covered with scrub oak and cactus. Here the group split up by twos, each pair selecting a canyon or ridge to hunt over. "Deadeye Don" Jones, a devotee of the 'scope sight, was my partner, and together we planned our hunt. Deciding to cover as much ground as possible, we chose our direction and started out, advancing in parallel lines, Jones along the bottom of a narrow canyon and I on the ridge overlooking it.

Not until this moment did the realization strike me that hunting an animal whose habits and reactions were quite uncertain might be a somewhat precarious business. As we moved off, my mind was stimulated by interesting thoughts of being rushed from behind by a wily old sow, or charged full tilt by a 250-pound tusker. Ears, eyes, and nerves on edge, we proceeded.

An hour and a half went by without our seeing anything larger than a brush rabbit. We scoured the area of another long ridge. Our fine edge began to dull. It was sharpened again by the sound of two distant rifle shots, brought to our ears by the stiff breeze that was blowing. Meat on the table for one of the boys, apparently. Then as I continued along the ridge, the far-away reports still echoing across the hills, boar hunting suddenly became a reality in my immediate vicinity. A



170 pounds of wild boar.

movement in the brush about twenty yards to the left caught my eye, and as I jerked to attention there trotted into view a black boar that looked at the moment as big as a buffalo.

I LOST no time getting off my first shot. Too hastily aimed, it caught the boar in the flank. Whether caused by fury or confusion, the effect of this swung him around in a straight line for me. Some quick shooting was in order. The boar ten yards away, I fired and made a complete miss. The report made him hesitate, however; he wheeled and headed down the side of the ridge into the canyon below. Rushing after, I yelled to Jones, but his answering shout came from three hundred yards away. The boar had disappeared under the dense growth of scrub oak at the bottom of the ravine. As I went sliding and leaping down the slope, he broke cover a hundred yards off, moving swiftly up the other side of the canyon at a long angle away from me. Checking my headlong descent, I stood and fired three times, making two hits. The last shot entered his chest just behind the shoulder and knocked him flat. The carcass rolled down hill and fetched up against a small tree.

Jones joined me in a fine state of excitement and we examined the boar. It was a large male with fairly sizeable tusks; we later found its weight to be 170 pounds, the heaviest taken here in several months. After cleaning the carcass, we dragged it to a protected spot and hid it well, as it was out of the question to carry it to camp without a horse.

It was now midday, and the wind had brought clouds and a light rain.



The author with a typical specimen.

We hunted another hour without success before rejoining the boys at the hilltop set as a meeting place. When everyone had straggled in, a check-up showed our morning's take to consist of one large tusker, two sows, three sucklings, and a small red fox with a nice pelt. The wetness of the weather ending the possibility of further hunting today, we trudged back through the drizzle toward our camp at the cove. It was a dreary walk—steady rain, rough country, and no lunch. But I for one didn't care; nothing short of an earthquake or a broken leg could spoil this trip for me now.

My experience with this boar dispelled a doubt I had as to the type of cartridge to use for game of this size. I have always favored the steel-jacketed bullet because of its penetration, but having recently seen deer knocked over very convincingly with soft-

nosed bullets, I had decided that for comparison I would use both if occasion arose on this trip. Accordingly I loaded my .30-40 Krag with two 180-grain steel-jacket and three 180-grain soft-nose cartridges. My first hit today was with one of the former, and as I said above, it didn't slow the animal particularly, although it passed completely through his body just behind the short ribs. The two hits with the soft-nosed bullets did far more damage. The last one entered at the right shoulder, traversed the chest, and lodged under the outer hide of the left shoulder, in which the bone had been broken and a wide section of flesh ripped to pieces; the second shot smashed a two-inch section of the backbone. As a result of observing such clear-cut differences in this and other instances, I have come to consider soft-nose ammunition superior to steel-jacket for killing power on medium-sized game animals.

After arranging our sleeping bags and blanket rolls in the loft of an empty barn at the cove, we all got together to cook supper, swapping stories and planning tomorrow's hunt while we cut carrots and peeled potatoes. A couple of hours of this activity produced a big mulligan stew that put everyone right with the



Typical boar country on Santa Cruz Island.

world. By the time darkness fell our sleeping gear looked mighty inviting.

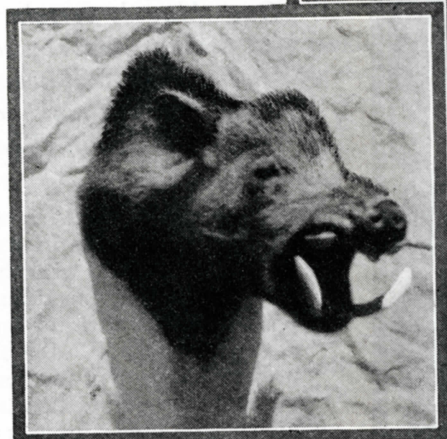
THE sky cleared Sunday morning, and we started out again. Sandy, our picturesque guide, was today reinforced by a pair of hound dogs loaned by our rancher host. This day's hunt covered the mountainous northern portion of the island. The dogs led us a merry chase over the high ridges. They were later to provide the only excitement of the day. Right now, nothing at all happened. After four or five hours it appeared that we were digging out an empty den; our wide ranging only scared up

a lot of mouldy-looking sheep who scampered to the hilltops and resented our presence with ridiculous bleats and baas. There were no boars—they must have been at Sunday school. The two hounds seemed business-like in their trailing, but we did better yesterday without them.

After a morning of this fruitless hiking I decided that a boar in hand was worth two in the bush, and left the hunt to call on young Justinian Caire, the owner of the island, intending to borrow a horse to carry out my boar. So it was not till later that I learned of the scrape the dogs got into.

Shortly after I left the hunt, those still following Sandy also gave up, and turned back toward the cove and our camp. Sandy took the dogs and cut across the hills for the ranch house, where he was to leave them. Wide stretches of thick cactus growth were common in this area. Boars had been known to hide in these patches occasionally, especially when there were dogs about. As the red-haired guide followed the winding path of the short cut, quietly enjoying his plug of Climax, Spike and Ranger ran on before him, out of sight in the waist-high cactus. So suddenly that Sandy nearly swallowed his quid, a tremendous burst of noise exploded fifty yards ahead. Frantic snarls and sounds of a wild scuffle guided him along the trail to a point where an inconspicuous runway led aside to an open spot in the dense cactus, where he came upon Spike and Ranger hotly engaged with two boars. Ranger, a cross-bred beagle, had clamped himself firmly behind the ear of the smaller one, a sow, and was being wildly jerked and thrashed about as she tried to shake him off. The big mongrel, Spike, had not come to grips with the other animal, a good-sized boar; the two of them were fencing madly around as the dog feinted and dodged in his efforts to hamstring the boar without

being slashed by its quick tusks. Not until the man appeared did the boars attempt flight. The larger one got away, but the sow, hampered by the tenacious Ranger, could not move quickly enough to escape a bullet from Sandy's .32, and so met with an untimely end. Spike had disappeared after his antagonist, who was now pretty safe, as a full-grown male is usually able to defend itself from a single dog. With cactus spines sticking out all over him,



*Above: The two sows taken, also sucklings.
Left: Mounted head by Bischoff's, Los Angeles.*

Ranger was regretting his enthusiastic attack in such close quarters. His late foe, outweighing him three to one, had slammed him around among the prickly-pears till he resembled a pin-cushion.

I LEARNED all this from Sandy when he arrived at the ranch with the unfortunate beagle, as Caire was saddling our horses. Leaving him picking the stickers out of Ranger, we rode out with an extra horse to get my boar. After reaching the canyon, it took the two of us the best part of an hour to drag the carcass up the steep slope to the point where we had left the horses. It was a tricky job getting the load packed. A boar, with most of the weight in the head and shoulders, is extremely difficult object to pack under any circumstances, and in addition, the packhorse was scared to death of it. We had to blindfold and tie him to a tree. After the boar was

securely lashed across the saddle, we started the long trail to camp, leading the loaded horse.

As the shadows grew longer that afternoon, I was feeling pretty good. It isn't often that we Californians can take part in a real hunting trip in the limited space of two days—a good hunt usually requires a week off and

a trip of five hundred or a thousand miles into the High Sierras or down to Old Mexico. To have gone out for a week end and now to be bringing home over one hundred pounds of wild meat was good cause for satisfaction. The wild boars of the Santa Barbara Islands are a real godsend to game-starved California hunters. Incidentally, I was lucky to bring in all my meat. One chap went back for his sow and found it almost entirely devoured by the crows and buzzards which abound on Santa Cruz. Before embarking for the mainland, I quartered my porker; the two shoulders and a side of chops went to the fellows who hadn't been lucky. The balance of that boar meat fed my household for two weeks, with plenty of friends in to help eat it. In taste and texture the meat resembles lamb rather than pork, and is surprisingly tender.

Much as we regretted it, our hunting was now over. With the horizontal rays of the setting sun burnishing the crests of the long groundswell, Captain Eaton's trim launch nosed away from Santa Cruz Island toward the distant dark line of Southern California. It carried a dozen men worn in body but cleansed in mind and heart. For two days we of the city had stepped aside from the daily millrace of our lives; we had smelt wood-smoke at twilight and known the thrill of hunting. For a brief space we had been as men would ever be, and as we plowed homeward over the darkening channel we asked no more of life than the chance to one day hunt again.



Felix and Leo Starr with their 105-pound boar.